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AUTHOR Dooley, Elizabeth E.; Savage, Luise B.
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ABSTRACT

This report addresses the need to assess teacher attitudes toward teaching culturally diverse youth in West Virginia. West Virginia ranks as the second most rural state in the nation, with a 64 percent rural population. Nevertheless, West Virginia's culture is becoming increasingly pluralistic, and many students are finding that they cannot identify with the middle-class values, perceptions, and expectations of their teachers. To address this problem, teacher training programs should provide teachers with the awareness and the competencies to meet the instructional needs of students from diverse backgrounds. The Cultural Difference Theory suggests that minority children are unsuccessful in school because schools do not capitalize on the experiences that these children bring to the learning environment. Therefore, teachers should integrate experiences from the students' culture into the curriculum, place less emphasis on ethnicity and social characteristics, and accentuate the individual strengths of students. Also discussed is the importance of creating an effective learning environment and developing special programs to encourage acceptance of cultural diversity by both teachers and students. (LP)

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ENCOURAGING DIVERSITY IN THE RURAL CLASSROOM

Elizabeth E. Dooley, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor
Special Education
West Virginia University

Luise B. Savage, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor
Special Education
West Virginia University

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Encouraging Diversity in The Rural Classroom

Abstract

West Virginia has comparatively little population diversity in its public schools at the present time. However, like many other parts of the country, the degree of diversity is increasing at a rate which finds many parts of the state unprepared for the varied cultural backgrounds of students coming here. This manuscript has two parts. The first describes the need to assess teacher attitude toward and training to teach culturally diverse youth and provides a description of a survey developed to ascertain the attitudes and multicultural preparedness of teachers in rural areas toward diverse populations. The second, provides activities, instructional strategies, and programs to encourage acceptance of cultural diversity by both teachers and students.

Introduction

West Virginia is a rural state in the heart of the Appalachian Mountains with a population of 1.8 million people. The state ranks as the second most rural state in the nation, with a 64 percent rural population. While West Virginia culture is becoming increasingly pluralistic, its schools and teachers tend to reflect the values of the European American middle-class culture (Turnbull and Turnbull, 1986). As a consequence, many students cannot identify with the prevailing middle -class values, perceptions, and expectations. This creates a mismatch between student and teacher which can precipitate school failure.

Assessing Teacher Attitude to Effect Positive Attitudes

Often, teachers are unprepared to effectively teach culturally diverse youth. Some may believe culturally diverse students come to the learning environment with the same set of learning styles as the majority culture. Typically, this is not the case. Since it is not, teacher training programs need to incorporate into their curriculum multicultural teacher training. Within that teacher training curriculum, teachers should master certain competencies. Those competencies include an understanding of cultural values, attitudes and belief systems. Also, some of the training should focus on various learning styles, cultural norms and behavior patterns of culturally diverse learners.

The definition of Multicultural Education varies from one context to another (Mattai, 1992). In 1972, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) defined Multicultural Education as:

> Education which values cultural pluralism. Multicultural education rejects the view that schools should seek to melt away cultural differences or the view that schools should merely tolerate cultural pluralism... It affirms that major education institutions should strive to preserve and enhance cultural pluralism. To endorse cultural pluralism is to endorse the principle that there is no one model American. (p. 264)

However, in an educational context, teacher training programs have to go beyond an education that values cultural pluralism. Valuing, encouraging, and appreciating cultural difference are merely constructs that tend to change ones perception of a diverse cultural group. Teacher training programs must prepare teachers to meet the cultural/instructional needs of students from various backgrounds. They must begin to understand the learning styles of learners from various cultural backgrounds and adapt or modify teaching styles so they are compatible with various cultural norms.

The (AACTE) also states that:

> Education for cultural pluralism includes four major thrusts: (1) the teaching of values which support cultural diversity and individual uniqueness; (2) the encouragement of the qualitative expansion of existing ethnic cultures and their incorporation into the mainstream of American socioeconomic and political life; (3) the support of explorations in alternative and emerging life styles; and (4) the encouragement of multiculturalism, multilingualism, and multidalectism...(p. 264)

While many multicultural educational models have incorporated these four ideals into existing programs, there is still a missing link when it comes to teacher training programs. The link that bridges the gap between one having cultural knowledge, and that individual having the ability to translate that knowledge into the delivery of cultural specific instruction has to be included.

When teachers lack adequate training, they may not be cognizant of the fact that students from diverse cultures may learn, and interact differently from other students. The lack of training may have been validated by various theories that have essentially dictated how teachers and administrators react to culturally diverse learners. Over the years, several theories have evolved describing the dynamics of various cultures within the broader context of the American society (Bank, 1982; Ogbu, 1981). Each of these theories provides differing frameworks, which in many cases dictate how we view others, and in some cases dictate how we teach students.

The first theory is the Cultural Difference Theory implying that there are distinct differences that exist between different cultures which are evident in values, languages, and behavioral styles of individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Ogbu (1981) suggests that school failure, particularly among African Americans is primarily due to differences in specific competencies and behavior which make it difficult to communicate and teach in the educational arena. Individuals supporting the Cultural Difference Theory believe that minority children are unsuccessful in school because schools do not capitalize on the experiences that minority children bring to the learning environment (Boykin, 1978; Cole & Bruner, 1971; Ogbu, 1981). Therefore, teachers should integrate experiences from the students' culture into the curriculum and instructional approaches.

Secondly, the Cultural Discontinuity Theory suggest that schools are not meeting the needs of individuals with cultural differences. Ogbu (1981) further expands on this point and suggests that European norms and requirements are imposed upon minority children. Therefore, there is discontinuity between the child's hame environment and that of the school (Inniss & Feagin, 1989).

Finally, the Cultural Deficit Theory implies that there is a dominant culture with experiences and behaviors, and those who do not or cannot comply are deprived, and lack the necessary "pre-requisites" to being both academically and professionally successful.

When these theories are placed in an educational context, the Differential Theory is most relevant. This is not to say the others should not be considered, however. The Cultural Deficit Theory and the Cultural Difference Theory have negative connotations and imply that little can be done. On the other hand, the Differential Theory suggests that there is something to be learned, and that learning should occur in teacher training programs. How much training is there in teacher training programs and how is that training put into practice? A survey developed to assess teacher preparedness to teach students from diverse cultural groups, and how that training is actually put into practice appears in the Appendix. It is anticipated survey results will point to a need to incorporate multicultural training into teacher training programs.

Activities and Strategies to Effect Positive Attitudes

The culturally diverse are generally those children from African- American, Native -American, Asian- American, and Hispanic populations. To effect a positive attitude one must first break down the preoccupation with the ethnicity or social characteristics of the group from which the child comes and begin to look at characteristics of strength. The characteristics of strength are similar to some of those found on Torrance's List of Creative Positives (1977). These are concerned with ability to express feelings and emotions, improvise, articulate role playing, sociodrama, and story telling. They stress enjoyment of visual arts, creative movement and expressive speech. Body language, humor, and richness of imagery in informal language are also included as creative positives.

Creating An Effective Learning Environment

Essential to learning for all children is the creation of an effective learning environment. For the culturally diverse, the first principle is to accept the fact that children from diverse backgrounds are not inherently deficient and that they are found in deviations upward from the normal population. Program opportunities which encourage the expression of abilities within the context of their cultural diversity are the ideal. An effective learning environment is sensitive to their needs and reinforces their achievements. It uses the potential of differing cultural expressions to instill pride and appreciation for the value of diversity and pluralism.

Within the individual classroom there are ways to improve interpersonal communication and classroom instruction. These include showing children expected behavior by modeling and having them observe, rather than by verbally instructing them. They are rarely to be rewarded and never reprimanded in front of the class and quiet, private communication is usually preferred. Social and academic competition between children may lead to problems so should be avoided; instead, activities such as cooperative learning in which children can share and work as teams, are preferable. It is best not to emphasize timed tests and assignments. Native artifacts or pictures that depict Native people realistically and with dignity should be displayed in the classroom; but stereotypic materials should be avoided.

Special Programs

Programs which incorporate multicultural awareness should also develop pride in and awareness of cultural differences which enhances student achievement and self-esteem. Those which have been successful, recognize that programs should provide both in-school and out-of-school opportunities and that mentorships should be developed for the students with community figures who could serve as role models. Programs that emphasize creative and/or performing arts such as puppetry capitalize on strengths and build self-esteem. Especially crucial are activities which help students learn about themselves.

Frasier (1979) describes one procedure as follows: Using the song "I've Gotta Be Me" and the poem A Dream Deferred by Langston Hughes, students are led in a discussion of what happens to dreams. They then talk about their ability to make decisions. They examine their powers within the setting of home, school, and community. Then, using exercises from Blum and Toenniessen (1992), they are helped to understand their personal wishes, beliefs, and values. In addition, they are guided in describing the kind of person they would like to become. Each student develops a short term goal and the plan is put into action after they have outlined all the resources, people and things they need to accomplish their goal. Students in the program are followed up periodically to see how well they are doing in meeting the contract they have set for themselves.

When counseling this population, acceptance and restatement of views; careful listening and periods of silence are usually acceptable (Frasier, 1979). They should be helped to develop a

questioning introspective attitude to provide insight into preparing for problems encountered as they become upwardly mobile at the same time that they are coping with pressures not to succeed. Guidance should be available which provides assistance in the selection of appropriate coursework and study areas.

Other program elements include putting Native items in the library such as periodicals and representatives of rich Native literature. Whenever possible, the curriculum should possess culturally diverse dimensions in social studies, music, art, dance, and foods. Problem solving techniques and decision-making skills should be an integral part of their curriculum so they may better align their cultural values with those of the dominant culture. Finally, even though too often the only program provisions in many schools are to offer remediation of skills that are lacking, this, too, is most essential, especially in language.

Combining children of different cultures in the same classroom can present difficulties, but learning about the culture of others can promote cultural self-awareness. When that happens, the multicultural classroom truly celebrates diversity.

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